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Author(s): Will Brantley

Source: *The Georgia Historical Quarterly*, Vol. 85, No. 1 (SPRING 2001), pp. 59-82

Published by: [Georgia Historical Society](#)

Stable URL: <http://www.jstor.org/stable/40584375>

Accessed: 06-03-2016 08:44 UTC

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The Surveillance of Georgia Writer and Civil Rights Activist Lillian Smith: Another Story from the Federal Bureau of Investigation

BY WILL BRANTLEY

Novelist Lillian Smith is the subject of a 134-page Federal Bureau of Investigation file—a file that is only a few pages shorter than that of John Steinbeck and several pages longer than that of Ernest Hemingway. Scholars Herbert Mitgang in *Dangerous Dossiers* (1988) and Natalie Robins in *Alien Ink* (1992) have provided near-definitive studies of the FBI files maintained on writers since 1911.¹ Neither Mitgang nor Robins, however, analyzed the file on Smith—an oversight to be sure, but one that is not inconsistent with scholars' neglect of Smith from the 1950s until the late 1970s when critics began to take note of her cultural and literary significance. Smith's file merits attention for what it reveals about her life and for what it suggests about the ways in which J. Edgar Hoover conflated changes in the racial status quo with an acceptance of Communist ideology. Smith's file highlights connections between Hoover's attacks on freedom of expression, on liberal-left organizations, and on civil rights in the South during his long tenure as the Bureau's director.

¹Herbert Mitgang, *Dangerous Dossiers: Exposing the Secret War Against America's Greatest Authors* (New York, 1988); Natalie S. Robins, *Alien Ink: The FBI's War on Freedom of Expression* (New York, 1992).

MR. BRANTLEY is associate professor of English at Middle Tennessee State University.

THE GEORGIA HISTORICAL QUARTERLY
VOL. LXXXV, NO. 1, SPRING 2001

Lillian Smith was born on December 12, 1897, in Jasper, Florida, and lived there until 1915 when her father moved his family to Rabun County in the North Georgia mountains. Smith attended the local Piedmont College and the Peabody Conservatory of Music in Baltimore. At age twenty-five she accepted a position at a Methodist school for girls in Huchow, China, where she lived from 1923 until 1925. These years were crucial to Smith's development as a radical thinker, for in China she observed patterns of racism and segregation and drew parallels between her native region and this foreign culture. Smith eventually returned home to assume the directorship of Laurel Falls, her father's summer camp for girls near the town of Clayton. There she fell in love with Paula Snelling, one of the camp's instructors, and they remained together until Smith's death from cancer in 1966. From 1936 until 1946 the two women edited a regional magazine, *South Today*.

During these years Smith began writing popular fiction. Her first novel, *Strange Fruit* (1944), concerned the doomed love affair between a young educated black woman and the white son of a wealthy doctor; the novel's treatment of miscegenation helped make it a controversial bestseller. Smith's next book, the autobiographical *Killers of the Dream* (1949; revised in 1961), was a powerful examination of the forces that sustained segregation and white supremacy. The book did not go without praise, but it was also loudly denounced by southern conservatives and even by some of the region's well-known liberals. Thus it was the work that Smith believed turned the South against her. Despite her ostracism, Smith continued to write, including another novel, *One Hour* (1959), and she continued to work on behalf of liberal-left organizations, offering her advice to many of the most important authors of her day. Scholarly interest in Smith has increased since 1977 when Morton Sosna devoted a chapter to her in his book, *In Search of the Silent South: Southern Liberals and the Race Issue*.² Anne Loveland's biography appeared in 1987;³ a collection of Smith's letters was published in 1993;⁴ and the first national conference to focus on Smith and

²Morton Sosna, *In Search of the Silent South: Southern Liberals and the Race Issue* (New York, 1977).

³Anne C. Loveland, *Lillian Smith: A Southerner Confronting the South* (Baton Rouge, La., 1986).

⁴Margaret Rose Gladney, ed., *How Am I to Be Heard? Letters of Lillian Smith* (Chapel Hill, N.C., 1993).



Lillian Smith was born on December 12, 1897, in Jasper, Florida, and lived there until 1915 when her father moved his family to Rabun County in the North Georgia mountains. At age twenty-five she accepted a position at a Methodist school for girls in Huchow, China, where she lived from 1923 until 1925. These years were crucial to Smith's development as a radical thinker. Smith eventually returned home to assume the directorship of Laurel Falls, her father's summer camp for girls near the town of Clayton. She died of cancer in 1966. This is a publicity photo for her book *Killers of the Dream*, 1949. *Courtesy of the Lillian Smith Estate.*

her writings convened at Georgetown University in 1994. In short, Smith is now regarded as an important figure in the “renaissance” of southern letters in the mid part of the twentieth century.

As this article might suggest, the FBI watched Smith, like many other writers, because she wrote about topics that were considered unsuitable and because she aligned herself with organizations that questioned the Cold War consensus in the 1950s. Smith signed the wrong petitions, subscribed to left-leaning periodicals, traveled to countries that aroused the Bureau’s suspicions, championed the interests of a non-white race, and (at least in private) expressed a non-heterosexual identity. She was, in short, poised for observation.

Any writer’s file can be viewed as a quintessential postmodern text—a collage of diverse documents and discourses. Robins provided a succinct definition when she wrote that a file, or dossier, “consists of separate pages of investigative reports, legal forms, interviews, memorandums, petitions, letters, articles, and news clippings that have been collected and clipped together in one folder by the Federal Bureau of Investigation.”⁵ References may be drawn from additional organizations such as the Central Intelligence Agency, the State Department, and the various branches of the military. Files might include interpretations of a writer’s work, wiretap transcripts, and reports from regional field agents. Files with highly inaccurate information were often made available to friendly editors and journalists such as Walter Winchell and Hedda Hopper.

Although a writer’s file can be put to excellent use by biographers and cultural historians, Robins warned that a file could never tell a “complete story.”⁶ Any file, Smith’s included, must be read with great care, meaning that it must be studied in conjunction with other documents such as letters, autobiographies, and interviews that comprise the public record of a writer’s life. One must also allow for the fact that a great deal of information in a file remains classified and is therefore blacked out.⁷

⁵Robins, *Alien Ink*, 17.

⁶*Ibid.*, 19.

⁷With Smith’s file, information has been blacked out for four reasons: national security; internal rules of the Bureau; unwanted invasion of personal privacy; and protection of an informant’s identity.

Especially relevant to Smith's file is the fact that Hoover and the FBI were relentless in their attempts to undermine and ultimately destroy the civil rights movement and its most prominent southern leader, Martin Luther King, Jr. Hoover's agency has been criticized for investigating the victims rather than the offenders, and it is well known that he used states' rights to counter the demands of civil rights activists. His strategy was in sync with what Smith, in *Killers of the Dream*, identified as a key southern strategy: the separation of states' rights from human rights. With various counterintelligence programs (beginning in 1958), Hoover embraced measures that would lead eventually to his undoing. The FBI's investigation of the murder of three civil rights workers during the Mississippi Freedom Summer of 1964—depicted with much inaccuracy in the film *Mississippi Burning* (1988)—and its assault on the Ku Klux Klan were in fact departures from the Bureau's more commonplace routines. As Kenneth O'Reilly tersely noted in his book *Racial Matters*, Hoover, a man who could tolerate blacks only in their place, actually "worked everyday to spread the white backlash."⁸

Of equal relevance to Smith's file is Hoover's equation of dissent with subversion. A writer could be judged negatively by merely confronting social and economic problems; the writer need not advocate any radical solutions. Smith's file, like that of Steinbeck, Hemingway, and many others, makes it clear that for Hoover a liberal was in effect a fellow traveler, someone who accepted a socialist critique of society. The FBI generally made no distinction between liberals and those groups that functioned further to the left. In *Hoover and the Un-Americans*, O'Reilly made an observation that few would now bother to contest, when he wrote that "the intelligence community devoted a good portion of its resources to subverting traditional American values, literally 'targeting' (in the jargon of the community) dissident activists and not simply spies and saboteurs"—all in the service of the Cold War and its ideologies.⁹

Hoover, of course, did not act alone. He had the support of Congressional conservatives in addition to the media. The FBI director—who held power for nearly half a century—could also

⁸Kenneth O'Reilly, *Racial Matters: The FBI's Secret File on Black America* (New York, 1989), 260.

⁹Kenneth O'Reilly, *Hoover and the Un-Americans: The FBI, HUAC, and the Red Menace* (Philadelphia, Penn., 1983), 4.



Hoover and the FBI were relentless in their attempts to undermine and ultimately destroy the civil rights movement and its most prominent southern leader, Martin Luther King, Jr. The FBI director equated dissent with subversion. A writer could be judged negatively by merely confronting social and economic problems; the writer need not advocate any radical solutions. *Photograph of Hoover from the Library of Congress.*

count on the support of key capitulating liberals, many of whom wanted to avoid playing into the hands of the radical Wisconsin senator Joseph McCarthy.¹⁰ In a sense, President Franklin Roosevelt's 1936 authorization for the FBI to investigate Communist and Fascist activities gave tacit sanction to many of Hoover's subsequent abuses. Ironically, Hoover despised Roosevelt's outspoken wife Eleanor perhaps more than any other public figure.¹¹ It is not easy to overestimate the extent of Hoover's power and influence. In one account of the Bureau, Steven Rosswurm observed that "Hoover, born in Washington, D.C., in 1885, was the FBI. Operating from convictions and values established during his childhood and alien-registration work in the Department of Justice during World War I, Hoover almost literally turned Bureau employees into himself. Hoover's su-

¹⁰In 1950 McCarthy opened his anti-Communist campaign. He used such methods as advocating guilt by association, making unsubstantiated charges against individuals, and even telling lies that often ruined people's lives. See William W. Keller, *The Liberals and J. Edgar Hoover: Rise and Fall of a Domestic Intelligence State* (Princeton, N.J., 1989).

¹¹Athan G. Theoharis, *From the Secret Files of J. Edgar Hoover* (Chicago, Ill., 1991), 59.

pervision of the Palmer Raids, moreover, solidified a mind-set concerning dissent that prevailed until his death.”¹² Hoover’s forty-eight-year legacy as the “Seat of Government” is in large part responsible for the difficulty the FBI has had in reforming its often invasive practices and significantly altering its public image.¹³

The first formal memo in Smith’s file is to Hoover himself. Dated December 9, 1943, the memo is from Edward A. Tamm, an assistant, regarding Eleanor Roosevelt’s “understanding” that the Bureau was “investigating Lillian Smith, and [name withheld] desired to know if this is true and why.” Tamm also mentioned Smith’s brother who “held the position of welfare commissioner or some other municipal position [Rabun County Ordinary], in which capacity he closed the houses of prostitution in Clayton, Georgia, incarcerating the prostitutes.” The memo concluded by citing a source who believed that Lillian Smith was “a social uplifter in favor of the negroes, although he is not positive of this fact.”¹⁴

The next day, Tamm produced a follow-up memo to Hoover, in which he wrote: “After talking with SAC [Special Agent in Charge], E. P. Hammock of Atlanta, I telephonically advised [name withheld] that in August of this year we received a complaint that one Lillian Smith of Clayton, Georgia, had, according to [name withheld] been engaged in the publication of seditious and communistic literature; that [name withheld] was interviewed and had nothing to substantiate her statements; that three or four interviews were conducted in Georgia which disclosed that Lillian Smith is a responsible, sound person, etc., and the case was closed. I told him that we have conducted no investigation.” The word “further” was, almost as an afterthought, penciled in before “investigation.”¹⁵

Anne Loveland provided the necessary context for understanding these memos. She noted that in December 1943 the Clayton and Atlanta postmasters interfered with the mailing of *South Today*;

¹²Steven Rossworm, “Federal Bureau of Investigation,” in Mari Jo Buhle, Paul Buhle, and Dan Georgakas, eds., *Encyclopedia of the American Left*, (Urbana, Ill., 1990), 221. The Palmer Raids took place in January 1920 when the FBI, without search warrants, broke into homes in thirty-three cities and arrested more than four thousand people.

¹³See F. Peter Model, “He’s Got a Little List,” *Wilson Library Bulletin* 66 (April 1992): 69.

¹⁴All references are to the file on Smith provided by the FBI in response to my Freedom of Information-Privacy request. While the Bureau tabulates the number of pages released, it does not provide a sequential numbering of these pages (hereinafter cited as Smith file).

¹⁵*Ibid.*

JOHN EDGAR HOOVER
DIRECTOR

CO-287

Federal Bureau of Investigation
United States Department of Justice
Washington, D. C.

EAT:XLW
Call: 5:10 PM
December 9, 1943

MEMORANDUM FOR THE DIRECTOR

Mr. Tolson
Mr. E. A.
Mr. Clegg
Mr. Coffey
Mr. Glavin
Mr. Ladd
Mr. Nichols
Mr. Rosen
Mr. Tracy
Mr. Acers
Mr. Carson
Mr. Harbo
Mr. Hendon
Mr. Mumfor
Mr. Starke
Mr. Quinn
Tele. Room
Mr. Nease
Miss Beahm
Miss Gandy

b7C X [redacted] called at this time regarding a friend of Mrs. Franklin D. Roosevelt named Lillian Smith of Clayton, Georgia, who owns a newspaper entitled "The South Today." [redacted] said he believes Lillian Smith is a social uplifter in favor of the negroes, although he is not positive of this fact.

Lillian Smith's brother held the position of Welfare Commissioner or some other municipal position, in which capacity he closed the houses of prostitution in Clayton, Georgia, incarcerating the prostitutes.

b7C b7D [redacted]

b7C [redacted] added that it is Mrs. Roosevelt's understanding that we are also investigating Lillian Smith, and he desired to know if this is true and why.

Respectfully,
Edward A. Tamm.

ALL INFORMATION CONTAINED
HEREIN IS UNCLASSIFIED
DATE 3/9/91 BY SP-16SK/mf

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FOR VICTORY
BUY
UNITED STATES
WAR BONDS
AND STAMPS

531 31 1943

The first formal memo in Lillian Smith's FBI file is to J. Edgar Hoover himself. Dated December 9, 1943, the memo is from Edward A. Tamm, an assistant, regarding Eleanor Roosevelt's "understanding" that the Bureau was "investigating Lillian Smith". *From the FBI file on Lillian Smith.*

moreover, "it appeared likely" that the Georgia legislature and the FBI would investigate both Smith and her co-editor Paula Snelling. Smith appealed to Eleanor Roosevelt, who then talked with Attor-

ney General Francis J. Biddle,¹⁶ obviously one of the names withheld in Tamm's memo, the other being that of the Clayton postmistress. In her collection of Smith's correspondence, Margaret Rose Gladney included a February 1943 letter from Smith to William Haygood of the Rosenwald Fund in which she recounted the events surrounding the attempted ban of her magazine. Smith recalled having written a letter to the Georgia governor, "a very calm and serene and tactful letter in which I told him how the magazine started, what its purpose is, and suggested that if he really feared his wife's camp director, to let me come down to his office and quietly talk things over with him." Smith then recounted another letter that she felt sure would also reach the governor:

I said that I did not want an investigation but if one came . . . I would make it as big and as public as such things can be made. That when I was asked if I believed in equality I would give the public the answer that has not yet been given in Georgia. I would say yes, I believe in full social equality; and I would answer every question asked me in plain, unequivocal answers. If they wanted to hear those answers given by a well known and respected white woman, all they had to do was to have the investigation. I think that letter was enough to put the fear of God in the governor and in the Negro-haters in the legislature. The very last thing on earth they want to hear is one of their women say these democratic things.¹⁷

It would probably be impossible to trace whether Smith's comments in fact reached the governor, or whether they accomplished her goal. One thing is sure: such sentiments clearly disturbed Hoover. Mitgang cited a comment from the director in another southern writer's file, that of Lillian Hellman, a contemporary of Smith. To a special agent in New York, Hoover wrote: "You are reminded that this subject has a national reputation through her writings in which she has opposed nazism and fascism. Under no circumstances should it be known that this bureau is conducting an investigation of her. It should be handled in a most discreet manner and under no circumstances should it be assigned to the local police or some other agency."¹⁸

¹⁶Loveland, *Lillian Smith*, 205.

¹⁷Gladney, *How am I to Be Heard?*, 68-69.

¹⁸Mitgang, *Dangerous Dossiers*, 156.

Smith is also linked to Eleanor Roosevelt, although somewhat indirectly, in another section of her file. On June 13, 1944, two publications were entered into Smith's dossier, both of which had been sent in by a friend of the Bureau. One was a "booklet" by Smith, "There Are things to Be Done" (a reprint of an article from *South Today*). The agent noted that it "discusses the very touchy problem of negro and white relations in the South." Sent in also were two issues of the *Alabama Sun*, which the agent described as "vociferous in its denunciation of equality for negroes" and which has "of course incurred the antagonism of the Southern Negro Youth Congress and other Negro groups." Featured most prominently in each issue is Eleanor Roosevelt's work on behalf of improved race relations; neither issue mentions Smith. The sender of these documents required no acknowledgment, but the implication is unmistakable: the sender was performing a good deed for the Bureau.¹⁹

Smith's booklet is essentially a series of suggestions that pre-date her longer tract, *Now Is the Time* (1955). Smith's suggestions are simple but also colored by her unique style. For example, she noted that "We can all begin to train our children now to be, not little Nazis, but democratic world citizens," a suggestion that, Smith acknowledged, would "require more imagination, more energy, and more of your time" than some of the others—for example, "Read a Negro's book or his articles; then write him a letter." Or, "Pay your cook more. Shorten her hours. Treat her with more consideration." One cannot miss the similarity between Smith's remarks and those made by Eleanor Roosevelt in a speech to the New Jersey Urban League. Here Roosevelt provided a series of "musts" for the postwar era, each of which deeply offended the *Alabama Sun*, which included pictures of Roosevelt on the cover of both issues, and which noted at the beginning of one article that "Every time Eleanor opens her big mouth, it's big news for the Negro newspapers, who boast of a circulation of over 2,000,000 in the South. The past week, Eleanor was journeying as usual but stopped at Newark, N.J., where a bunch of Negroes were having a jamboree, and naturally Eleanor had to stop there and have her picture taken again with a nigger." Included also is a reprint of an article by Langston Hughes from the *Chicago Defender*, one of the

¹⁹Smith file.



Lillian Smith, Mary McLeod Bethune, and Eleanor Roosevelt at a reception for the National Council of Negro Women's 1944 Honor Roll. Published in the *Washington Star*, February 11, 1945. © *Washington Post*; reprinted by permission of the D.C. Public Library.

nation's leading African-American newspapers, and a summary of "Articles from 'Inciting' Negro Presses," including one on Eleanor Roosevelt, also from the *Chicago Defender* (a publication for which Smith began writing her weekly column, "A Southerner Talking," in 1948). Below the masthead of the *Sun* is the "emblem" of the Democratic Party in the South—a cock sandwiched between the words "White Supremacy" and "For the Right." It may seem odd that forty-two pages—nearly one third—of Smith's file is devoted to such offensive drivel, but it is important to note that the Bureau was not in the business of making fine distinctions. Robins quoted a comment by journalist Drew Pearson: "A piece of information comes in from one source which means nothing. Then something comes in from another source, and perhaps from a third source, which taken separately mean nothing. But put together, they begin to

tell a story.”²⁰ The story emerging is of two bold women committed to the cause of equality in the daunting face of institutionalized racism.

Twenty-four pages of Smith’s file are devoted to the controversy surrounding the attempts to ban her novel *Strange Fruit*. These pages are concerned predominantly with the attempt to ban the novel not in Boston (where the state supreme court in fact ruled the novel to be obscene), but in Detroit, where the ban was never official.

On May 31, 1944, R. A. Guerin, Special Agent in Charge, Detroit, wrote to Hoover regarding Smith’s novel and the “Interstate Transportation of Obscene Literature.” He noted that “the language used and thoughts conveyed by the author of this book are of a questionable nature and may possibly come within the Federal Obscene Literature Statute.” The memo summarizes the attempts of the prosecuting attorney of Wayne County, Harold Helper, and others (including one Sergeant Case, whose name is concealed here, but not in a later memo) to “secure a voluntary suppression of this novel.” Had it not been for one bookstore choosing to follow the lead of the Detroit Public Library, which refused to remove the book from its shelves, this strategy—a gentlemen’s agreement—might have worked. The agent noted nonetheless that Sergeant Case, in conjunction with the “juvenile delinquency enterprise,” among other contingents, believed that the novel’s language would “aggravate a serious juvenile delinquency problem which is of utmost interest at the present time.” The sergeant also claimed that “if no objection is made to this novel, the problem of censorship will become more difficult.” The memo cites nine pages from the eighth printing with possible examples of “obscenity of language.”²¹

Hoover responded to Guerin’s memo on July 5, 1944, by requesting a copy of the novel and by providing an enclosure of two pages which contained notes on Smith and her novel that had been compiled by the Bureau. The items included were a clipping from the *People’s Voice*, a summary of Smith’s “fable” of “Mr. Rich White and Mr. Poor White;” and columnist Walter Winchell’s warning to readers in Boston that the novel was at the top of the best-seller list. The enclosure cited a Bureau note to the effect that *Strange Fruit* deals with “Negro problems” and has been widely

²⁰*Ibid.*; Robins, *Alien Ink*, 19.

²¹Smith file.

“published” (meaning, one assumes, “praised”) in the communist press. No mention is made of the fact that it had also been panned by publications on the left.²² It was also noted that the sale of the novel was, at that point, not in fact banned in Boston; rather, the novel was removed from bookstores at the suggestion of city officials—another gentlemen’s agreement between the police department and timid booksellers. The notes included condemnations of the ban by the Massachusetts Committee for Racial Unity, and by F. O. Matthiessen and Theodore Morrison, both of Harvard University. When “the South stands up on its hind legs and defends the Negro,” Morrison argued, “it ought to be good news in Boston.”²³

In the memos that followed, one catches a glimpse of the FBI in the role of keystone cop. Hoover received the novel, but the alleged obscene passages did not correspond to the page references previously provided by the Detroit agent. “You are requested,” Hoover wrote on August 10, 1944, “To confer with [name withheld] and further identify those passages by transporting the citations over to the 11th printing or, in the alternative, to quote the passages from [name again withheld, but obviously Sergeant Case].” Upon finally examining the appropriate edition (complete this time with marked pages and passages), Hoover expressed his doubt that “any successful prosecution could be obtained on a book of this type.” The “obscene passages,” he wrote, “are similar to those which have appeared in other best sellers in the past, such as *Tobacco Road*, *The Grapes of Wrath* and *Kitty Foyle*.” Hoover nonetheless suggested that the Detroit agent discuss the book with the U.S. Attorney “in order that he might express his opinion as to prosecution.” Since the publisher, Renyal & Hitchcock, was located in New York, he noted that a copy of the book would be sent to the New York field division. One month later, on October 13, 1944, Hoover wrote a seemingly impatient follow-up memo in which he reemphasized his doubts about prosecution and requested, once again, that the Bureau be advised of the U.S. Attorney’s view of the matter.²⁴

On October 27, 1944, the Detroit agent wrote to Hoover that Thomas P. Thornton, Chief Assistant U.S. Attorney, Detroit, and

²²See Loveland, *Lillian Smith*, 68-79.

²³Smith file.

²⁴*Ibid.*

John Leer, U.S. Attorney, Detroit, had read the alleged obscene passages—though not the novel “as an entirety”—and had reached the following conclusion (which either the agent or possibly Hoover underlined for emphasis): “Mr. Thompson advised that he and Mr. Leer considered the passages obscene. However, in view of the nation-wide distribution of the book, he would neither decline prosecution, nor express an opinion as to prosecution possibilities. It was his opinion that because of the widespread publicity attendant upon the sale of the book, its rating as a ‘best seller,’ and its sale in practically all judicial districts throughout the United States, the matter should be referred to the Department by the Bureau.” Thompson wanted to know in which judicial district should prosecution be pursued if it were felt that the case warranted legal action. The agent noted that Sergeant Case understood the controversial questions involved in attempted prosecution, but felt nonetheless compelled to take action “in view of the fact that he would be subjected to criticism by purveyors of salacious literature” if he were to ignore this novel.²⁵

Hoover wrote a memo to Assistant Attorney General Joe C. Clarke in November in which he summarized the affair up to this point. (The FBI lingo is not without its own interest; in this case, Hoover refers to the “rental” of the book by the Detroit Public Library). Clarke’s response, later in the month, is one of the more sensible components of Smith’s file. He explained why the book could not be successfully prosecuted: the test must be not whether individual passages containing four-letter words were obscene but whether the book itself was “predominantly obscene.” He added, “It does not appear that the marked passages in ‘Strange Fruit’ reflect the dominant theme of the book.” Hoover passed Clarke’s assessment on to the Detroit agent, adding that “In view of the Department’s opinion, no further action should be taken by your office, or by the New York Field Division.”²⁶

The Bureau continued to chart the progress of the ban in Boston through a number of newspaper clippings, primarily from the *Washington Times-Herald*, but including also one very witty editorial, “Strange Purity,” from the *Washington Post*, proof that nearly

²⁵ *Ibid.*

²⁶ *Ibid.*

anything might appear in a writer's file. The editorialist suggested that "Mr. Bernard De Voto—who brought the case of 'Strange Fruit' into the courts by publicly purchasing a copy of it—that he insist upon the prosecution of any Massachusetts bookseller who dares henceforth to offer a volume of the Scriptures for sale." No mention is made of Franklin Roosevelt's intervention (at the urging of his wife, acting again on behalf of Smith) when the Post Office Department actually banned the novel from the mails.²⁷

Perhaps the most intriguing component of Smith's file are five pages from June and July of 1946. In a letter to Hoover in June 1946, New York Special Agent in Charge explained that another agent, also of the New York field division, was recently on leave in Georgia and "had occasion to be in company with Miss Lillian E. Smith, well known writer and author of the best seller novel, 'Strange Fruit.'" According to the agent, "Miss Smith made extensive comments relative to her attitude towards the Communist Party, as well as various remarks concerning the racial situation in the South." It was noted that Smith had been invited but had refused to join the Communist Party; that she had also refused to associate with "front" groups; and that she had declined, because she was always too busy, to contribute pieces to the *New Masses* or *The Daily Worker*. Among many other observations, the agent provided the following comment: "According to Miss Smith, the Communist Party for many years has 'preached' to the Negroes of the Southern states that 'no one in the South would ever actually do away with discrimination, nor would anyone in the South ever help them out of their present economic plight.'" Smith implied that she could not accept the party as the "panacea" for the "ills" of the South, and she expressed her belief that the party was largely responsible for the failure of the Broadway play of *Strange Fruit*. The agent claimed that Smith was considering writing an article to be titled "How to Recognize a Communist" and of openly denouncing the party "in order to clear up the doubts which may exist in the minds of some people." The agent pointed out that Smith's remarks were made in the presence of several other people.²⁸

²⁷*Ibid.*; Loveland, *Lillian Smith*, 71-72. See also Smith's account of the ban in Gladney, *How Am I to Be Heard?*, 81-82.

²⁸Smith file.

These comments, assuming Smith in fact made them as precisely as they were presented, are not inconsistent with remarks she made to various correspondents at the time. What is missing is the necessary context for such remarks. Still, one statement attributed to Smith smells of invention on the part of the agent: "Miss Smith remarked that she was 'tempted to say that, should the United States go to war with Russia, we should not allow any Negroes to work in U.S. defense plants—certainly not the educated Negroes.'" It is almost impossible to imagine Smith making such a crass statement. Relevant to a justified suspicion that she probably did not make this remark is a reflection from Clarence M. Kelley, director of the FBI from 1972 until 1978: "Most reports were written, rewritten, edited, scrubbed, and cleaned and pressed a dozen times before they were put in the mail. Reportorial accuracy was seldom a consideration. Almost everyone in the organization was usually afraid to tell Hoover the truth for fear of upsetting him—and for fear of the inevitable punishment. As a result, Hoover often had to rely on information that had been sugar-coated for him."²⁹

Hoover responded with a memo to the special agent in charge in Atlanta, in which he noted that Smith had given the impression of being "definitely anti-Communist." Hoover said that the Bureau contained a "considerable number of references to Miss Smith in connection with her activities as Editor of 'South Today,'" and that she has "been linked with a considerable number of Front groups despite the fact that she mentioned in the above described conversation her lack of such association with such organizations, most prominent among the groups being the National Council of American Soviet Friendship." The heart of Hoover's memo, is, however, the passage that follows:

In view of her attitude as expressed above at this time the possibility exists that she may be turning from the Party and may be in a position to provide information concerning its ramifications, particularly in regard to negro matters. The Bureau's files indicate her address to be Old Screamer Mountain, Clayton, Georgia. The Bureau desires that a review be made of the files of the Atlanta Field Division and advice submitted to the Seat of Government as to whether in the opinion of the Atlanta Office it would be feasible

²⁹*Ibid.* For the quote, see Robins, *Alien Ink*, 18.

and/or advisable to interview Miss Smith, utilizing a suitable pretense rather than contacting her directly on the question of communist activities. In this regard, it is thought by the Bureau that Miss Smith might be contacted with regard to information in her possession concerning racial matters or racial conditions and, if it is found in the course of our contacts with her that she is desirous of cooperating, she might later, without direct suggestion from the Bureau, volunteer to furnish data of a pertinent nature in her possession concerning activities which are Communist in context.

Hoover suggested that the Atlanta agent be prompt in his reply and urged that "Since Miss Smith has numerous contacts in the New York area which is the center of Communist activity in this country, the New York Office should be kept advised of this attempt to ascertain the present view of Miss Smith in regard to Party activity."³⁰

The memo reveals that Hoover took it as a given that Smith, if not a Communist in 1946, had at the very least been a fellow traveler in past years and that she might now be of use to the Bureau. The year, 1946, is not without its own significance, for in February the FBI launched its war on American Communism. As historian Steven Rosswurm observed, the goal of this "offensive" was three-fold: "to separate Communists from those who would work with them; to politically isolate left liberalism [hence the value of a prominent southern liberal such as Smith]; to make communism the nation's only significant political issue."³¹ Or as Kenneth O'Reilly remarked, a major intent of the 1946 decision was to "influence the debate within the liberal community between 'First Amendment extremists' and Cold War liberals who believed Communist party members were not entitled to traditional constitutional protections."³²

The question is, of course, was Smith interviewed, and, if so, did she cooperate? And here lies the most frustrating part of her file: there is no follow-up from the agent in Atlanta to Hoover's memo. Perhaps the agent made his assessment by telephone and the conversation, for whatever reason, was not recorded. Or, it is possible that Smith was interviewed and the resulting report

³⁰Smith file.

³¹Rosswurm, "Federal Bureau of Investigation," 222.

³²O'Reilly, *Hoover and the Un-Americans*, 6-7.

labeled “Do Not File,” which, as Robins points out, can greatly complicate the scholar’s research.³³ Whatever approach may have been used, it is very difficult to imagine a special agent not responding to a missive from the “Seat of Government.”

It would seem unlikely that two files exist on Smith—at least not for security reasons. The best one can do in the face of such an information gap is to look at the remaining material in her file, all of which suggests that she probably did not cooperate (at least not to Hoover’s satisfaction) and that the Bureau would continue to find as many reasons to suspect her left-leaning involvements as it had prior to 1946.

Checks were done on Smith on four occasions between June 1958 and October 1963, once in connection with “Communist Infiltration of the Chicago Committee for a Sane Nuclear Policy” (February 19, 1962), once in connection with information concerning the “Women’s International Strike for Peace” (April 17, 1962), and twice in connection with “Communist Infiltration of the NAACP” (June 30, 1958, and October 23, 1963). The last of the NAACP investigations was conducted during the period in which Hoover had begun an all-out struggle to undermine the civil rights movement before it would become impossible for him to do so. The highly publicized march on Washington that took place on August 28, 1963, became for Hoover a symbol of a mass movement that he would attempt to undermine.

The reports on Smith contained a summary of her profile in *Who’s Who in America*; references to her name in the *Daily Worker* and other publications; and material provided by informants (most of whom were deemed “reliable”). The identities of the informants have been blacked out. In two cases the FBI provided a summary of the remarks she made to the New York agent in 1946. Smith was identified as having belonged to the Socialist Party and the Worker’s Defense League (it was dutifully noted that she had contributed one dollar to the WDL). She was listed as part of the Committee for Equal Justice for Mrs. Recy Taylor, an organization formed to procure state action in the case of a young black woman, who, on September 3, 1944, was abducted and raped by a group of white youths at Abbeville, Alabama. This committee was said to be

³³Robins, *Alien Ink*, 18-19.

associated with the International Labor Defense and the International Workers Order, both of which had been suspected of Communist ties. It was noted that Smith's name had been carried on the files of the Southern Negro Youth Congress (SNYC) as either a sponsor or contributor. It was also noted that Smith had served on the board of the Southern Conference for Human Welfare (SCHW); no mention is made of the fact that she resigned from this board in 1945 because she felt that the organization had become undemocratic. The Bureau supplied notes on each organization. The SNYC was identified as a Communist front; the SCHW was described, inaccurately, as an organization whose appeal to southern liberals was a smoke screen for its larger subservience to the Communist Party in the United States.

The FBI's name checks of the indices and printed hearings of the House Committee on Un-American Activities (HUAC) reflected over twenty additional references to Smith, none of which had been checked against the original sources. Though the Bureau urged "extreme caution" in "utilizing the information," it nonetheless made the citations available. Its disclaimer—"This document contains neither recommendations nor conclusions of the FBI"—is, in short, a joke. To illustrate the absurdity, one woman named Lillian Smith was identified as the assistant editor of a twelve-page mimeographed magazine published twice each month to aid the *Daily Worker* Fund Drive in Los Angeles, 1937. Another Lillian Smith was identified as Michigan State Education Director of the Elks and as having signed a statement on behalf of Communist cases. Were there three Lillian Smiths, one in L.A., one in Detroit, and one in Clayton, Georgia? The FBI made no distinction.³⁴

A pamphlet of the International Union of Students noted that Smith had been "under fire" (this reference was suspicious enough to find its way into her file). One entry observed that Smith was the author of a book selection of the Book Find Club (identified as a front by the California Committee on Un-American Activities, a committee that rivaled HUAC in its search for subversives); another entry commented simply that Smith gave a speech in Montgomery that had been sponsored by the Methodist Federation for Social Action, which, the FBI alleged, had been formed by Commu-

³⁴Smith file.

RE: LILLIAN SMITH
CLAYTON, GEORGIA

Another Confidential Source advised that in [REDACTED] b7
the name LILLIAN SMITH, Clayton, Georgia, appeared in a
publication of the Southern Conference for Human Welfare,
wherein she was identified as a Board member of this
organization.

The Southern Conference for Human
Welfare was cited by a special committee on
un-American activities report of March 29,
1944, page 147, as a Communist front which
received money from the Robert Marshall
Foundation, one of the principal sources of
funds by which many Communist fronts operate.

This organization was further cited by
a Congressional Committee on Un-American Activities
report #592 dated June 12, 1947, as a Communist
front organization "which seeks to attract
Southern liberals on the basis of its seeming
interest in the problems of the South," although
its "professed interest in the South's welfare
is simply an expedient for larger aims serving
the Soviet Union and its subservient Communist
Party of the United States."

Another source advised in [REDACTED] b7
LILLIAN SMITH of Clayton, Georgia, was carried in the files of
the Southern Negro Youth Congress as either a sponsor or a
contributor to that organization.

It should be noted that the Southern
Negro Youth Congress has been designated by the
Attorney General as coming within the purview of
Executive Order 10450.

This document contains neither recommendations nor
conclusions of the FBI. It is the property of the FBI and is
loaned to your agency; it and its contents are not to be
distributed outside your agency.

- 3 -

Smith's FBI file also noted that Smith had served on the board of the Southern Conference for Human Welfare; no mention is made of the fact that she resigned from this board in 1945 because she felt that the organization had become undemocratic. *From the FBI file on Lillian Smith.*

nists with "an eye to religious groups." One entry stated that although Lillian Smith would "not appear high in a tabulation of communist-front organizations which is based solely on statistical considerations," she was still "affiliated with the notoriously communist American Peace Mobilization." The entry does not clarify how she was affiliated. Other citations include the Progressive Citizens of America and the Congress of Racial Equality (CORE). The

notorious Senator James Eastland from Mississippi had cited Smith as one of several CORE directors or supporters who had been associated with Communists or Communist-front groups.³⁵

Smith's file, with its many misleading references, forces readers to confront her status as a liberal anti-Communist—a "Cold War liberal." This term is not particularly revealing, mainly because Smith's attitudes toward communism were complex and cannot be represented by a simple label. Smith may have conveyed the essence of her beliefs in a 1960 letter in which she criticized James Dombrowski, a former director of SCHW, for what she perceived to be a too sanguine view of the Soviet Union. Smith then noted with pride that she had criticized Joseph McCarthy long before it became fashionable to do so. Her contention that McCarthy was not actually against communism deserves close attention, for it illuminates her thinking as well as the Bureau's McCarthy-like tactics. Writing to her friend Jane Stembridge, Smith said that McCarthy

was against the future, against change, against all kinds of free, creative search for truth. That is why he was so dangerous; and that is why he pulled so many people to him. He was a hater of the human spirit. I fought him because of this, and I fight the red-baiters because they are dishonest; it is not the communists' evils that they dislike but their virtues. And these virtues you and I *like*. I have never known a red-baiter who disliked censorship, or curtailment of personal freedom; or dictators, or the infringement of civil rights. No; what red-baiters dislike is the human search for truth, the value we put on man, the person, and man the human being. That is why they seem dangerous to me. They dislike in communism their concern for the physical welfare of men, and their attempt to abolish poverty.³⁶

As these remarks reveal, Smith's position on communism was more subtle, more complex, than the Bureau, with its quick assessments and its division of the world into only two camps, could ever have understood.

Two other pieces appear in Smith's file, an article from the *Chicago Defender* which reported on Smith's commencement ad-

³⁵*Ibid.*

³⁶Gladney, *How Am I to Be Heard?*, 260.

dress to Atlanta University in 1958. Here Smith denounced demagogues and called for a white leader with the force and compassion of the young Martin Luther King, Jr. Included also in her file is a review, from the *Washington Star*, of her tract *Now Is the Time*, written in the wake of the Supreme Court's 1954 ruling to desegregate the public schools. Among other direct quotations of Smith's small book, the reviewer cited Smith's reply to the question, "the Communists think segregation is wrong, and so do the liberals. Are the liberals just following the Communist line?" Smith's response: "Long ago, Jesus Christ worked for peace. Does that make Him now a Communist? He also worked for brotherhood and the acceptance of all people as children of God. Does this now place Him as the First Communist?"³⁷

Was Smith aware that she had a lengthy FBI file? Robins noted that most of the writers she interviewed did not know that they were the subjects of files maintained by the Bureau. Smith said in 1943 that "G-men" and the Georgia Bureau of Investigation gave her the "creeps," and in 1958 she could still make jokes about how much she was loved by the GBI "boys."³⁸ There is no reason to assume that she would feel differently about Hoover and the FBI agents. Moreover, there is no evidence to suggest that Smith's career was affected by her file, although the same cannot be said of William Carlos Williams who, because of an unfavorable report, was turned down as Consultant in Poetry at the Library of Congress.³⁹ Perhaps the most positive spin that can be put on the files on Smith and other writers is the one provided by E. L. Doctorow: "To have your dossier in among the half-dozen or so Nobel laureates amounts to being on an American 'honors list.'"⁴⁰ Doctorow has a point, but the list was clearly no matter of honor for Hoover, his supporters, and countless other organizations.

Novelist Howard Fast claims that the FBI was responsible for the demise of social protest fiction, a view accepted (at least in part) by Grace Paley and other writers.⁴¹ Fast may have exagger-

³⁷Smith file.

³⁸Gladney, *How Am I to Be Heard?*, 67, 224. For a consideration of Smith's apparent investigation by the GBI, see Pat B. Brewer, "Lillian Smith: A Thorn in the Flesh of Crackerdom," *Furman Studies* 26 (1980): 104-14.

³⁹Robins, *Alien Ink*, 293-95.

⁴⁰Quoted in Model, "He's Got a Little List," 71.

⁴¹Robins, *Alien Ink*, 237, 400.

ated, but the negative force of the Bureau must not be underestimated. In the words of Steven Rosswurm, the files, though incomplete and often blacked out, “show that the histories of the twentieth-century American Left and the FBI are inseparable. They demonstrate, furthermore, that the FBI, led by a genuinely American totalitarian, has often functioned as a policer of thoughts and a subverter of the Bill of Rights.”⁴² The entry on Smith in a publication of the John Birch Society is alarmingly similar to the record of her alleged “front” involvements provided by the FBI.⁴³ The profile even notes Smith’s minimal involvement with the Committee for Equal Justice for Mrs. Recy Taylor, even though the group disbanded shortly after it was formed and does not even merit a passing reference in any of the standard histories of the American left. It is widely acknowledged that the Bureau “leaked” its findings and conclusions to friendly organizations—even to far right groups such as the John Birch Society. The anti-Communist enterprise depended heavily upon the tactics of anti-civil libertarianism.⁴⁴

In the end one can say that the FBI watched Smith, like other writers, because she was a writer with an audience, although that audience, for a wide variety of reasons, dwindled during her lifetime. Former Attorney General Ramsey Clark has commented on the rationale of the Bureau’s files on Smith and other writers. Though Clark opposed “the accumulation of information by federal criminal investigative agencies that is not maintained in a form that is available to the public,” he nevertheless underscored the impulse that prompted the investigations and which demanded their secrecy: “writers are shakers and the police will always fear writers because of their capacity to destabilize. I think it’s always been true. Writers are more dangerous than others; they’re the undercover agents of the other side, in a way.”⁴⁵

⁴²Rosswurm, “Federal Bureau of Investigation,” 223-24.

⁴³Francis X. Gannon, *Biographical Dictionary of the Left*, 4 vols. (Boston, Mass., 1973), 4:588-89.

⁴⁴After his death in 1972, it was revealed that Hoover’s coffin had been lined with lead in order to guard against a terrorist attack, and that two pallbearers were injured from their part in putting the “Seat of Government” to rest. Who could ask for a better metaphor to embody the lead-like poison that Hoover and his ideologies exerted on the cultural life of his time? See Curt Gentry, *J. Edgar Hoover: The Man and the Secrets* (New York, 1991), 525.

⁴⁵Robins, *Alien Ink*, 404.

Throughout her long career, Smith certainly performed her share of “undercover” work, yet her ties to left-leaning organizations were often tenuous at best, and Hoover must have realized this. Smith’s file reveals less about her leftist associations than it reveals about the forces that sustained the Cold War and the institutionalized racism in mid-twentieth century America. Her file reveals the contempt with which the Bureau regarded those who attempted to improve racial relations. The most compelling revelation of Smith’s file is that though she made her reputation as a writer and citizen activist who set out to undermine the forces of white supremacy, for J. Edgar Hoover she was at one point valued not just as an outspoken liberal but as an outspoken southern liberal who might be used in his crusade against racial equality, communism and—along the way—any other groups commonly defined as left of center.